

Feminist Perspectives

Numbers 12:1-16 Galatians 3:23-29
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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As most of you are aware, we recently started a congregation-wide Book Study over zoom on **Isabel Wilkerson's 2020 masterpiece, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents***. Wilkerson writes a caste system (which is usually only thought about in connection with India) is **"an artificial construction, a fixed and embedded ranking of human value that sets the presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of other groups on the basis of ancestry and often immutable traits, traits that would be neutral in the abstract but are ascribed life-and-death meaning."** The premise of her book is that long before we became the United States of America, the earliest colonists, specifically those that brought the first slaves from Africa in 1619, formed their society on a caste system. Long before the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, with the famous line, **"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,"** it was clearly evident that our society was instead structured like a ladder. Skin color was the primary determining factor of where one stood. White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant men were on the top rung, African Americans were on the bottom rung, and everyone else was somewhere in between.

During our Book Study discussion just last Tuesday, it was rightly brought up that **women, too, have always been assigned to a lower rung on the ladder than men.** That, of course, is indisputable. Seeking equal rights, privileges, and respect for women and their perspectives is still an ongoing struggle. The mainline Presbyterian Church didn't begin to ordain women as elders until 1930, and as ministers of word and sacrament (pastors) until 1956, just 65 years ago. **Many Presbyterian congregations are still reluctant to call a female pastor, and those female pastors are almost always paid less than their male colleagues.** And yes, that is true here in Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery, as well.

I'll want to confess something today. I was one of those who was slow to come around. It took me until my mid-30's, when I entered seminary in 1989, to realize that **women view the world differently than men. Why wasn't I ever told this? Or more likely, why didn't I listen?** I learned, sometimes the hard way there at San Francisco Theological Seminary located in Marin County, that there are many factors that can lead individuals to experiencing life differently – and gender is perhaps one of the most prominent of those factors. The result was a lesson in **learning how to listen, really listen, to women's experiences and perspectives on basically everything, including things such a biblical interpretation, theology, and spirituality.** It took me until fairly recently to apply the same openness to the experiences and perspectives of those in the Black community. That, in and of itself, is a reflection to my own buy in to the caste system.

So yes, for example, gender plays a role in how one connects with and experiences the Sacred Presence of God with and within us. **One of the factors that draws many to Celtic spirituality is the value it places on the feminine characteristics attributed to the Divine.** Our own **Celtic Circle** here at College Hill, which was formed 8 years ago in 2013, organized and led by Mark Miller, has indeed brought a broader understanding of the nature and character of God.

I'd like to share with you today a few readings from female authors and scholars that made a strong impact on me, and perhaps will for you, in leading to a greater understanding of what can be called a feminist worldview – in the most positive sense of that term. The first reading comes from the Introduction to ***The Women's Bible***

Commentary. Editors Carol Newsom, Associate Professor of Old Testament at Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta, and Sharon Ringe, Professor of New Testament at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., write:

Although women have read the Bible for countless generations, we have not always been self-conscious about reading as women. There are many reasons why it is important that we do so.

Women have distinctive questions to raise about the Bible and distinctive insights into its texts: our experiences of self and family, our relationship to institutions, the nature of our work and daily life, and our spirituality have been and continue to be different in important respects from those of men.

But there is another reason, too. Because of its religious and cultural authority, the Bible has been one of the most important means by which woman's place in society has been defined. **Throughout the centuries, of course, the Bible has been invoked to justify women's subordination to men. But it has also played a role, sometimes in surprising ways, in empowering women.**

It has barely been over 100 years that women, once excluded from both religious offices in the church, and most higher educational opportunities, have been able to enter the arena of biblical scholarship. That has changed drastically, however, over the past 50 years. It has been even more recently that female biblical scholars have been received by academia as writing about biblical interpretation and theology with authority and respect.

In her landmark 1964 book, female professor of biblical literature, Margaret Brackenbury Crook, published a study on the status of women in Judaism and Christianity entitled **Women and Religion**. In it, she makes reference to the Old Testament passage from Numbers 12 that we heard today concerning Miriam, Aaron, and Moses – all three brothers and sister. As you noticed, Miriam and Aaron both get on God's bad side for questioning Moses' authority. However, **only Miriam is punished with leprosy and exclusion, not Aaron, even though he was just as guilty as her.** Crook pointedly observed:

A masculine monopoly in religion begins when Miriam raises her indignant question: 'Does the Lord speak only through Moses?' Since then, in all three of the great religious groups stemming from the land and books of Israel - Judaism, Christianity, and Islam - men have formulated doctrine and established systems of worship offering only meager opportunity for expression of the religious genius of womankind.

Though I haven't read Crook's work, I was deeply affected by a book that was required reading in a spirituality class at seminary entitled, **Women at the Well: Feminist Perspectives on Spiritual Direction**, written in 1989 by Kathleen Fischer, a theology professor at Seattle University and a counselor at Mt. St. Vincent Nursing Center. In the Introduction she states:

Since feminism has a variety of meanings, I want to clarify my own use of it in designating this book as feminist perspectives on spiritual direction. I understand feminism to be a worldview, a lens through which we see the world and all its internal relationships. As such, **feminism stands in contrast with sexism as a worldview.**

Sexism gives us constricted perspectives on the natures of women and men. It has become so much a part of our consciousness that the way the church and society are presently structured seems to be the way things naturally are. With the support of religion, these structures even appear to be divinely ordained. [That, by the way, is another factor used to construct and uphold a caste system: "It's just the way God wants it to be!"] The distortions of sexist perspective are not evident until we switch to a fresh viewpoint.

Feminism provides a new way of seeing reality. It is an alternative worldview which replaces the divisions intrinsic to sexism with models of wholeness for both women and men. **Feminism is a vision of life emphasizing inclusion rather than exclusion, connectedness rather than separateness, and mutuality in relationships rather than dominance and submission.** Feminism also entails the conviction that full individual development can take place only within a human community that is structured in justice. **And so, feminism works for social change.**

Needless to say, College Hill Presbyterian Church would not have designated itself as a 'More Light Presbyterian' congregation back in 2001 (20 years ago!), advocating for the equality of LGBTQ persons of faith within leadership roles in our denomination, if it hadn't already understood and embraced feminist perspectives. For **feminism has helped lead the way for other inclusive movements.** And the church today is slowly beginning to reevaluate numerous theological perspectives and biblical interpretations after carefully listening to the voices of those long silenced.

One more helpful reading, also dealing with spirituality, is by United Methodist minister Judith Smith, written in 1993. (*The Weavings Reader: Living with God in the World*, John Mogabgab, ed., 1993). The article, entitled ***This Ground Is Holy Ground***, reads somewhat like a diary. Smith echoes the reality that her spiritual journey just didn't seem to fit the male-dominated understanding of spirituality. She writes:

For the first time I am learning to pay attention to the deep calling of my own spirit and the Spirit within me. I am learning to listen in new ways to my mothers and sisters and daughters in the faith. Attempting to mold my spiritual life to those traditional [male] voices often has not led me to new depths. I took a major step when I recognized that perhaps that was not due to some shortcoming on my part but simply a reflection that my journey was leading me down different roads...

It took courage for me to claim that the life of the Spirit in me was no less present because my road was different from that of some of the authorities I had look to for so long. Learning to trust that our own inner authority is valid is often difficult for women... **I have found deep joy in learning to value my own experience, to trust the Spirit of God in me, and to pay attention to the connections between myself and other women.**

To each one of you here today, and to those watching on our YouTube channel, **wherever you find yourself on the spectrum of gender, sexuality, and/or race, I encourage you to listen more and more to your own voice, and learn to value and trust it.** That voice may indeed be the indwelling Presence of God speaking to you!

And let us be even more intentional about listening carefully to the experiences of each other. When we practice open, active, non-judgmental listening we can broaden our own understanding and theological perspectives if we allow ourselves to see the Bible, spirituality, theology, and the world itself through the lenses of others.

It's not an easy process to hear and accept things in a new way from a different perspective. It's even harder for us to allow ourselves to expand our often-ironclad boundaries of understanding, even as progressives. So it is on this day, and every day, **we give thanks for the unique voices, questions, perspectives, experiences and worldviews of women.**

Let's look at the caste system in this country for what it is, an arbitrary way to rank people on supposed superiority and inferiority. That's the first step in making a real difference.

So, at this time, please rise now in body or in spirit as we join together in our *Litany In Celebration of Women* that you will find as a bulletin insert. [See next page.]

Amen.

• A Litany in Celebration of Women •

Leader: Today we give thanks to God for all women,
 Women who live in all places and throughout all time.
 For women who are mothers of children.
 For women who choose not to have children,
 For women who are unable to have children,
 For women who have lost a child.

**People: For women who create, who bring to birth art and ideas,
 For women who have blazed trails for others to follow,
 For women of music and dance, arts and the sciences,
 For women in leadership positions,
 For women who work in the market place,
 For women who work in the home.**

Leader: For women who are ill or abandoned or who grieve,
 For women who are surrounded by love and comfort,
 For women in poverty or abuse,
 For women who are respected and heard.
 For women whose voices have gone unheard.

**People: For women who reach out to other people,
 For women who nurture God's creation.
 For women who love and are loved by others,
 regardless of sexual orientation,
 For women of faith,
 For women of fortitude.**

**All: For all women we give thanks to God.
 To the God who is without gender and of all genders.**